The First Administration of Mayor Lewis Cutrer of Houston, 1958-1960

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More than a decade has passed since Lewis Cutrer, a transplanted Mississippi lawyer, was elected mayor of Houston in 1957. The city, then with a population of about 800,000 people, was one of the fastest growing cities in the nation, and this challenged Cutrer with a number of new or unsolved problems.¹

It was Lewis Cutrer’s earliest associations in the city’s legal circles that led to his interest in politics. After about two years of practicing law in two different firms, he became an assistant city attorney when Walter E. Monteith was mayor of Houston from 1929 until 1933.²

Monteith was the political rival of Mayor Oscar Holcombe, the perennial mayor of Houston for a period of eleven non-consecutive terms. It was natural for Cutrer to join with the political friends of Monteith in opposition to the Holcombe camp, for, after all, it was Monteith who had appointed him as an assistant city attorney. Later, when Holcombe defeated Monteith for a term beginning in 1934, Cutrer left his job as assistant city attorney and joined with the ousted Monteith to organize a new law firm.³ They practiced together until Monteith was elected justice of the First Court of Civil Appeals in 1939, and then Cutrer formed his own firm.⁴

Apparently Cutrer was a sympathizer and supporter of the “outs” during the Holcombe administrations and became an open opponent of Holcombe. For no sooner had Holcombe been defeated and a new man taken over the mayor’s duties, than Cutrer won political appointment to a new and better job at City Hall. He was city attorney from 1941 until 1947, having first been appointed by Mayor C. A. (Neal) Pickett and reappointed by Mayor Otis Massey. In 1947, Cutrer was out again because Holcombe came back to the mayor’s desk. Obviously, Cutrer was a perennial out during the Holcombe administrations. Cutrer supported Mayor Roy Hofheinz in his election campaigns in 1952 and 1954.⁵ When a scandal ripped Holcombe’s administration late in 1957, Cutrer decided this was the year to try his luck as a candidate for mayor of Houston.

The very nature of the campaign cast Cutrer more or less in the role of a “reform mayor.” The Holcombe administration presented a tarnished image. One of the eight councilmen had been accused of making a $100,000 profit in the purchase of some bonds issued by a water district.⁶ Cutrer seized on this as he campaigned against Mayor Holcombe in 1957. Both Cutrer and Mayor Holcombe fought out their first campaign along personal lines. No evidence of partisan politics could be found. There were no Republican or Democratic primaries, only a city election and then the run-off between Holcombe and Cutrer. Cutrer came in first in the general election.

In the 1957 mayor’s race, Cutrer was supported by former Mayor Hofheinz and many liberals. In fact, when Cutrer appeared as a candidate for mayor in 1957, most Houstonians believed that the liberal forces were “pushing another Hofheinz.”⁷ This was natural to believe since Cutrer’s previous government activities branded him as an opponent of Holcombe and therefore a liberal.⁸ Cutrer was allied with the liberal faction by virtue of his alignment with Mayor Walter E. Monteith’s administration,
when he served as assistant city attorney. Cutrer had also served as city attorney for liberal oriented Mayor Neal Pickett in 1941 and 1942, and as city attorney during the city manager period from 1943 to 1946. During 1955 and 1956, Cutrer had served as general attorney for the liberal-controlled Houston Independent School District, and later he served as Mayor Roy Hofheinz's personal attorney.

Many of Cutrer's opponents hoped that his associations with Hofheinz would help defeat him. It was precisely because Cutrer appeared to be a liberal, that the conservatives tried to secure a candidate to oppose him. It was for this reason that the conservatives asked Oscar Holcombe to run again. Holcombe agreed to run, and decided to make crystal clear his stance by calling himself a "conservative" in the campaign. As an index to Holcombe's support, it was noted that all three Houston newspapers and almost all of the business leaders of Houston favored Holcombe.

The Holcombe-Cutrer campaign was probably as near to a conservative-liberal battle as is possible in Houston City campaigns. However, the Democratic leaders of the city did not actively participate in that they did not officially endorse candidates, and did not use party funds to back city candidates. The Democrats, on a personal level, did, however, support individual candidates. The conservative-liberal aspect of the 1957 campaign actually took its label more from the former associations of candidates than from specifically stated proposals and platforms.

Public reaction to racism appears to have played an important part in the election. In the first election Cutrer received nearly 10,000 more votes than Holcombe. Yet the other two candidates polled enough votes to keep Cutrer from winning a majority. Cutrer had strong support from the Negro voters, and allegedly Holcombe tried to use Cutrer's considerable Negro support to defeat Cutrer in the run-off election. However, when voting time came, Cutrer succeeded in carrying every black precinct in Houston by a surprising combined margin of 22 to 1. In addition, Cutrer carried a majority in each of the "labor boxes." Lewis Cutrer apparently caught the imagination of the voters because the December 3 vote showed 67,600 to Holcombe's 39,156.

On January 2, 1958, Lewis W. Cutrer was sworn into office as mayor of a city of 800,000 people and covering 349 square miles. The burgeoning city of Houston presented the new mayor with many problems.

One of Cutrer's first acts in office was to call together the City Council to discuss adoption of a two-year public improvement program to be supported by $35 million in bonds. He asked the voters to approve this program during his first month in office, and on January 24, 1958, the bond issue was overwhelmingly passed. With his public improvement program financed and underway, Mayor Cutrer set about other tasks, mainly those of solving the water problem, buying a second airport site, building a new charity hospital, and studying the needs of the inadequate bus system.

Cutrer felt that the major accomplishment during his first two-year term was bringing together the various warring factions and getting them to accept a plan to solve Houston's industrial water problems.

In 1958, Houston was one of the nation's major cities without an adequate industrial water supply. This had become a nation-wide problem as industrialization increased. Houston's growing industrial complex along the Ship Channel was demanding large quantities of water which the underground supply could not satisfy. Under Holcombe's administration, engineers recommended that the Trinity River be the source of needed water and that a reservoir, Lake Livingston, be constructed at a place seven miles southwest of the city of Livingston.

The Trinity River Authority was empowered by the state of Texas to develop the Trinity. Therefore, the city of Houston could not build the reservoir without the
permission and co-operation of the TRA. The TRA was a Dallas oriented agency and was charged with being generally disinterested in helping Houston solve its water problem, although it had co-operated fully with Dallas and Fort Worth in developing water sources for those cities.

In late August of 1958, Ben Carpenter, president of the Trinity River Authority, lead a delegation of TRA representatives to Austin for the purpose of a joint hearing with city of Houston officials before the State Board of Water Engineers. The problem to be discussed was whether Houston, which lies outside the Trinity Watershed, or the TRA, was to build two projects on the lower reaches of the Trinity. These two projects were to be a dam and a reservoir at Livingston and a salt water barrier at Wallisville in Chambers County. Houston, which wanted to build a reservoir capable of yielding 1.2 billion gallons of water daily, applied for a permit to build. However, the TRA had filed earlier for permission to build such a dam. Carpenter at first said that the granting of Houston's request for reservoirs at Wallisville and Livingston would wreck the Master Plan for the development of the Trinity.

In February, 1958, Carpenter made a special proposal to supply Houston with 550 million gallons of water daily from the Trinity. At the time, Mayor Cutrer refused the offer, saying the price was too high.

Officers of the TRA claimed that the Texas Legislature charged the Authority with the sole responsibility for building reservoirs along the Trinity River. Carpenter, president of the TRA, declared that the act which created the TRA placed the responsibility of building the salt water barrier upon the Authority. In a heated verbal battle, Mayor Cutrer accused the Mayor of Dallas and TRA president Carpenter of making statements that were not true and not based upon fact. Cutrer asserted that there was enough water in the Trinity for all the cities and counties in the watershed and for the additional seven counties which asked for permission to use Trinity Water. Mayor Cutrer announced that he was forming a citizen's committee and that he intended to make personal visits to every point in the seven county area in order to present accurately Houston's plan of development.

In January of 1959, the TRA mapped out a careful campaign to scuttle Houston's rival plans on the Trinity. They voted (1) to build a reservoir at Livingston and a salt water barrier at Wallisville as soon as possible, (2) to circulate petitions throughout the watershed counties protesting Houston's application to build, and (3) to employ a lawyer from the Trinity area to work in the watershed area in an effort to counteract what Houstonians were saying about this case.

August 31 was set as the day for the beginning of the combined hearings of Houston's and the Trinity River Authority's application for dams on the lower Trinity River. TRA president Carpenter and Mayor Cutrer met secretly in Austin two weeks prior to the scheduled August 31 hearing in an effort to air their disagreements and to consider once again the others' proposals.

On August 26, 1959, Cutrer announced that the State Board of Water Engineers had postponed until September 15 the proposed hearing on Houston's Trinity water plan. The hearing was postponed in order to give Houston more time to seek a compromise agreement with the TRA.

A permanent agreement between the Trinity River Authority and Houston was finally reached on September 9, 1959. This compromise Trinity River Plan marked the end of a near two-year battle between the city of Houston and the Trinity River Authority. There were three main provisions to the agreement: (1) Houston was to receive approximately 70 percent of the daily yield of 1.2 billion gallons, while the TRA was to receive the other 30 percent; (2) Houston and the TRA were to build,
operate, and maintain the project by sharing the costs on a 70-30 ratio; and (3) reservoirs
were to be owned equally by the Trinity River Authority and Houston.34

To summarize the role of the mayor in this project, we have seen that in order
to bring together the various hostile factions into a workable program to solve Houston’s
industrial water shortage, Cutrer had organized a campaign which took him up and
down the river, speaking to political groups, county officials, state representatives,
senators, and the public, urging co-operation in getting the reservoir built. He urged
the people in the nine southermost counties to pressure the TRA into relenting and
signing a contract with the city of Houston for the construction of the lake. This was
an excellent and unusual public relations job, in that Cutrer won the respect and co­
operation of the leading citizens in the counties and cities along the Trinity River as
well as members of the TRA board itself. The final outcome was, of course, that Cutrer
and the TRA hammered out a contract for the construction of the dam.37

The signing of the agreement on September 9, 1959 between the city
of
Houston
and the TRA meant that a supply of water estimated to permit expansion
up to
the
year 2010 was in
sight.38 This in itself was enough to encourage large industries in
other sections of the nation to come to Houston and to expand plants they already
had in the Harris-Chambers county industrial area.

Another of Cutrer’s chief accomplishments during his first administration was the
purchase of a site for the Houston Inter-continental Airport, eighteen miles north of
the city. It had become obvious that the existing airport was inadequate for the future
needs of the growing metropolis.

During his first two-year term, Cutrer’s administration completed the purchase
of a site for the new airport from the Jetero Ranch Company. The Jetero Ranch Com­
pany was composed of a group of twenty civic leaders and oilmen who had formed
a syndicate for the specific purpose of purchasing the 3,125 acre site39 which had been
earlier blocked up and set aside by their agent, Archer Romero.40

In October, 1957, before Cutrer was to take office as mayor of Houston the follow­
ing January, Holcombe made arrangements for the purchase of the site.41 On November
6, 1957, the City Council unanimously approved an ordinance authorizing the mayor
to execute a contract with the Jetero Ranch Company for the purpose of buying the
land.42 According to the terms of the agreement, the city of Houston was to pay
$1,860,938.27 to the Jetero Ranch Company for the 3,125 acres of land over a three
year period.43 The first payment was due on February 1, 1958. The entire purchase
was to be completed by February 1, 1960.44 It was obvious that the actual purchase
of the tract would be a decision for the future city administration (Cutter’s) to make,
since the principal payment would not be made until the end of the three year period.45

The city of Houston defaulted in its first interest payment to the Jetero Ranch
Company, due February 1, 1958.46 According to the terms of the Jetero contract, if
Houston defaulted on any payments, the land was to revert automatically to the Jetero
Ranch Company. However, Jetero notified Cutrer that they would gladly extend the
deadline. Fortunately for the city of Houston, this extension prevented the loss of
the option for the second airport site.47 The city of Houston moved nearer realization
of a new jet airport when the City Council, on March 26, 1958, voted to pick up the
option on the second airport site.48

In April, 1958, Colonel E. A. Hansen, district engineer at Galveston, brought it
to the attention of Clinton Owsley that a 1954 offer of 4,160 acres of land made by
the United States Army Engineers for an airport site for Houston still stood. The site,
which was located inside the Addicks Dam Reservoir, could be acquired by the city
without cost.49
On September 9, 1958, the City Council formally rejected the Addicks Reservoir as the site for the city’s new jet airport. A report made by Airport Engineer Clarence Lieb revealed that it would cost the city approximately $1,500 per acre to build up the land’s elevation to the 110 feet required. In addition, the city would have to purchase more land outside the reservoir. This would mean that the Addicks site would really cost the city more than the Jetero site.50

It was not until June 27, 1960, that the Houston City Council authorized Mayor Cutrer to finally close the deal with Jetero.51 The owners of the 3,125 acre site were subsequently paid the $1,860,938.27 as principal payment plus considerable accrued interest and miscellaneous fees.52

Cutrer had successfully launched the project of acquiring a jet-age airport for Houston. He had worked hard and diligently in laying the groundwork for aviation changes and improvements which were to be realized later. What Cutrer actually accomplished in the aviation area was (1) to buy the site, (2) to win new and improved air routes for Houston from the CAB, and (3) to hire professional planners to start mapping out the new facility.

In April of 1958, Ben Taub, chairman of the Jefferson Davis Hospital Board, announced that the overcrowded hospital, where seventeen babies had died recently as a result of staphylococcus epidemic,53 had been alerted by the American Hospital Association that it would lose its national accreditation if construction of a new charity hospital was not started by May 4, 1959.54 What actually happened was that in May of 1958, a joint commission of the American College of Physicians, American College of Surgeons, American Hospital Association, and the American Medical Association withdrew the accreditation of Jefferson Davis Hospital.55

After the initial threat and subsequent loss of accreditation, it was obvious that the building of a new charity hospital was of the utmost urgency.56 There were, however, two major obstacles which greatly delayed the building of the hospital. These were the problems of financing the hospital as a joint city-council project and the problem of where the hospital was to be located. The question concerning finances was whether or not the city and the county would share the hospital costs on a 70-30 percent ratio as earlier planned, and whether or not the federal government would grant part or all of the needed $1.5 million from the Hill-Burton Act funds.57

The problem involving the location of the hospital centered around the fact that Mayor Cutrer, the Houston City Council, and Baylor University College of Medicine wanted to build the hospital at the Texas Medical Society, plus many interested private citizens of Houston wanted the new charity hospital to be built at the present Jefferson Davis Hospital site on Buffalo Bayou.58

The argument given for the construction of the hospital at the Texas Medical Center was that it was more centrally located, would be more easily accessible to charity patients, and would provide excellent medical facilities since it would be located in the Medical Center.

Those who wanted to build the new hospital at the old Jefferson Davis Hospital site said that this location was more accessible to the indigent sick of the city since it was located near an artery of intersecting highways and on a freeway. They also claimed that it would be much less expensive to have the new hospital at the Jefferson Davis site because the taxpayers would then be supporting only one large charity hospital at one location, instead of two hospitals at two different locations.

In April of 1958, the Harris County Medical Society’s executive board rejected the proposal of County Judge Bob Casey when he asserted that the new city-county charity hospital should be built in the Texas Medical Center.59
Baylor Medical School, which then staffed the Jefferson Davis Hospital as part of its teaching program, made it quite clear that it wished to continue that arrangement with the proposed new charity hospital. However, the Harris County Medical Society wanted the staffing of the hospital split three ways between the Medical Society, Baylor College of Medicine, and the University of Texas Postgraduate School of Medicine. On April 28, city and county officials approved the immediate construction of a new 350-bed charity hospital in the Texas Medical Center. This surprise ending to the fight over the Medical Center site, which was opposed by the executive board of the Harris County Medical Society, came by majority vote of both the City Council and the Commissioners Court. Both the council and the court approved the following: (1) construction of new outpatient and emergency facilities at Jefferson Davis Hospital; (2) shelved the question of how to finance the new hospital operation until some indefinite time in the future; (3) refused to take any action on proposals to share professional staffing of Jefferson Davis Hospital.

In May of 1958, city and county officials finally ironed out their differences concerning the plans for the financing of the new charity hospital. The City Council ended its disagreement and voted 7-2 to accept the County Commissioners' demand that the city continue to pay 70 percent of the operating cost of the two charity hospitals until the time that the county could take over the entire burden.

In order to help finance the hospital, Mayor Cutrer applied for federal Hill-Burton Act funds. By June, 1958, it was still doubtful as to whether Houston would receive any federal aid at all. One reason for this was that the city of Houston had still not reached a final decision on where the hospital was to be located.

The Harris County Medical Society, still not content with the proposed hospital site in the Medical Center, sought to force a city-wide vote on the location on the new hospital. The Medical Society's referendum proposal was submitted to the voters at the July 26 primaries. The vote on the city ordinance requiring the new charity hospital to be built at the Jefferson Davis Hospital site was voted down by a count of 41,949 to 38,838. This meant that the new hospital was to be built in the Texas Medical Center near the Baylor University College of Medicine.

On September 9, 1958, Houston did receive the $1.5 million grant in federal Hill-Burton Act funds. This grant assured the city and county of enough money to rehabilitate Jefferson Davis Hospital and to build the new charity hospital. On December 1, the Commissioners' Court approved preliminary plans for the $12 million hospital project.

Public transportation is a problem that plagues practically every major American city. Probably none has found the complete solution; certainly Houston has not. However, Mayor Lewis Cutrer did assume the task of studying the needs and deficiencies of the Houston Transit Company. He wrestled intelligently and effectively with the various problems of the system, realizing that something had to be done to improve bus service in Houston.

There were at least four problems concerning the bus system with which Mayor Cutrer had to deal. First, there was a great need to improve and especially to air-condition the city buses. Second, the Houston Transit Company was in dire financial straits with the company being verbally up for sale. Third, the bus company vehemently challenged their tax evaluation and assessment. Last, the Transport Workers Union demanded a wage increase which involved a fare hike. A bus strike was scheduled for November 3, 1959 if a solution to the financial problems had not been reached.

In 1958, when Cutrer took office as mayor of Houston, the Houston Transit Company was operating old, yellow buses; none were air-conditioned, and some were as
old as eighteen years. Although Cutrer realized that a fare increase would probably be involved in the air-conditioning of city buses, he was still interested in the project because, among other things, he was greatly concerned about "keeping up" with the progress of Dallas, and other Southern cities. In January of 1959, Mayor Cutrer remarked that if the Houston Transit Company failed to air-condition at least some of its buses before summer, it would surely set a new record as "the most backward transit company" and would be the "laughing stock of the South." It was in May of 1957, that the Houston Transit Company first flew distress signals when its gross revenue dropped 11.3 percent over a period of twenty-three months. From all outward indications, it appeared that the bus company was going out of business. Just two months prior to leaving office, Mayor Holcombe quietly ordered the Houston Transit Company's 1957 tax bill reduced by more than 50 percent. This, of course, averted an impending bus strike. However, in June of 1958, Mayor Cutrer ordered that the Houston Transit Company's taxes were to be restored to the full assessed valuation of the firm's personal property. The bus company vehemently challenged this tax assessment by appealing its 1958 tax bill to the City Council, claiming illegal and improper assessment of its personal property and franchise.

In December of 1958, Cutrer suggested an assessment cut of approximately $1.8 million from the Houston Transit Company's original assessment. He did not, however, try very hard to push through his measure and the City Council failed to take any action on the proposal at that session. However, on December 30, 1958, the Houston Transit Company quickly accepted the City Council's offer to settle its 1958 tax bill for $91,378.47 instead of $163,730. In revising the figures upon which the 1958 taxes were based, Mayor Cutrer placed an arbitrary value of $25,000 on the controversial bus franchise. Cutrer vindicated this action on the grounds that some of the buses were almost twenty years old, and that the average life of a bus was eleven years. Probably, with tongue in cheek, he said a consideration of the historical value rather than the market value was used in reaching the decision.

The contract of some 850 members of the Transport Workers of America Local 260 with the Houston Transit Company was due to expire on November 3, only eighteen days prior to the November 21 city elections. If no agreement was reached by this time, then Cutrer would have to be untangling bus problems at the same time that he was running for re-election. This, of course, could be politically disastrous.

The principal demands asked by the union were a 16-cent hourly wage hike for the first year and a 10-cent hourly wage hike after a year, plus fringe benefits. The drivers were trying to push their hourly wage scale above the existing $2.04 rate.

On October 21, the Houston bus drivers voted unanimously to strike at one minute after midnight on November 3 unless "a decent settlement" with the bus company had been reached. By November 3, 1959, the drivers for the Houston Transit Company went on strike.

Almost immediately, the striking bus drivers voted to end the four-hour-old bus strike. They agreed to return to work under a 15-day contract extension which was proposed by Cutrer. The offer, which was an 8-cent hourly increase for the first year and a 6-cent the second, was contingent upon the City Council's approval of a company requested bus fare increase.

On November 15, just before the two-week "cooling off" period was to expire, Mayor Cutrer presented a new proposal which he hoped would avert a city bus driver's strike. This proposal was for an immediate 1-cent fare hike, and the releasing of the company of any obligation to finance air-conditioned buses at the present time. The next day, a new two-year contract was signed, granting the Houston Transit Company
drivers a wage increase, and ending threats of a bus strike. In the agreement the City Council granted the company a 1-cent fare raise, sufficient to cover the wage increase. The adult fare was raised from 22 to 23 cents and the token fare was raised from 20 to 21 cents. On December 14, 1959, the City Council, acting upon recommendation from Mayor Cutrer, voted unanimously to reduce the Houston Transit Company’s 1959 taxes from $96,737 to $78,937. Problems relating to service and air-conditioning remained. Nevertheless, the company's management and their employees seemed willing to continue operations and the city had avoided the expenses and complaints which would attend any attempt of city ownership and operation.

The newspapers and many conservatives had felt in 1957 that Cutrer had been the creation of liberals. However, once in office, Cutrer quickly succeeded in reconciling himself with many of the conservatives who had opposed his election in 1957. Consequently, by election time in November of 1959, no outstanding business leader and not one Houston newspaper opposed Cutrer’s re-election. This was a sizable accomplishment, considering that just two years before, every newspaper in Houston had opposed Cutrer and nearly all of the top business leaders in the city were against him.

It is difficult to ascertain just how Mayor Cutrer became so quickly acceptable to the conservatives. Liberals said that one reason for this success was that Cutrer made it his policy never to cross business interests. The liberals accused Cutrer of defecting from their camp in favor of middle-of-the-road support.

In 1957 Cutrer was elected mayor with strong liberal support. By the end of Cutrer’s first year in office a very definite voter realignment had taken place, and by election time in November of 1959, the support for Cutrer, both liberal and conservative, was balanced.

Although Cutrer did not bring to ultimate completion any of his major projects during these first two years in office, he did wrestle intelligently and effectively with the problems of securing needed revenue by pushing through the bond issue, obtaining assurance of acquiring badly needed industrial waters from the TRA, expanding the airport, solving the controversy over the new charity hospital, and improving the highly inadequate bus system of Houston. Also, Cutrer set up and successfully launched a far-reaching and quite varied program for public welfare and, at the same time, won popular support from the citizens of Houston. The political appraisal of Cutrer’s administration, regardless of personal conflicts, evidenced much success and accomplishment for the city of Houston during his first two years as mayor. The citizens of Harris County, being cognizant of Cutrer’s many contributions to the civic welfare, re-elected him mayor of Houston in 1959.
NOTES

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9Gray, Politics of Houston, Pt. 2, 32.

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